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**Sunday 21 November 2021 to Sunday 28 November 2021**

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Sunday 21 November 2021

# Life-giver

by Maria Rudolph

**I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life (John 5:24).**

Read John 5:21–29

What is life-giving for you? When your favourite footy or sports team wins, does that make you feel alive? What about quality time with a person you love? It leaves you buzzing, invigorated, ready to take on the next challenge. Or maybe none of this resonates with you. What is it, then, that is life-giving for you?

And what does it mean that the Son gives life? Jesus gives life. What do we understand by that? God is our creator and literally gives us our lives, knits us together in our mother’s womb (Psalm 139:13). Just as God ‘breathed the breath of life’ into Adam in Genesis (2:7), we are filled with life because of him. And life as a Christian, as a follower of Jesus, is not limited to our earthly life. Because Jesus has died, you live forever. The blood of Jesus has won salvation and forgiveness for you. The blood of Jesus has covered over the power of darkness, so no ungodly thing can completely take hold of our lives and destroy us. You have been claimed by God through Jesus to have life to the full (John 10:10).

If you want to think about it that way, we rise up to new life with Christ every day. The power of the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to see how we can tap into that exciting potential of being God’s vessel and his servant day after day. Life in God is to be found in serving others around us. Hold on to the solid foundation that you have a new life in Christ today. This new life is brimming with possibilities of how to be life-giving and Christ-giving to those around you. The fruit of the Spirit will guide you in this. Today, display love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22,23). This is how your life-giving God works through you in the power of his Holy Spirit. These fruits give life to the weary, the hungry, the sick, the sad. You can be a life-giver today because your Life-Giver tenderly embraces you as a dearly beloved child worth dying for.

How can you be a life-giver today?

**Jesus, my loving Life-Giver, I am so grateful to be included and accepted by you and that you would consider me worth dying for. I thank you for my life with all its joys and challenges, and I offer it to you today as a humble offering. Do with my life whatever you will; use me according to your purposes. Open my eyes and ears to be life-giving to the people around me today. Amen.**

Monday 22 November 2021

# A helping hand

by Maria Rudolph

**The men grasped his hand and the hands of his wife and of his two daughters and led them safely out of the city, for the Lord was merciful to them (Genesis 19:16).**

Read Genesis 19:15–29

To be part of a stampede must be a petrifying experience. There was a recent report in the news of a hip-hop concert where several people in the crowd were crushed to death when the 50,000 people present suddenly surged forward. People felt crushed and suffocated because there were so many bodies pushed up against them. They were not even able to lift up their arms. Can you imagine what a relief it would be if someone was able to simply lift you out of that oppressive situation immediately?

While you may not have had to experience a stampede, situations we are faced with in life can feel much the same way. All of a sudden, your equilibrium is disturbed, and you are gasping for air. Something weighs heavily on you, and you can join with the words of the psalmist: ‘I am feeble and utterly crushed; I groan in anguish of heart’ (Psalm 38:8).

But God is never distant. Today, we witness God working through angels to keep Lot safe. Lot had been living in the city of Sodom, which, together with Gomorrah, had become completely corrupt and evil. It would have been a harsh environment to exist in as a God-fearing family, and yet once a place becomes home, changing everything by moving to a new one becomes daunting. God warns Lot through his angels that he will bring judgement on the cities and that Lot and his family need to get out immediately to be safe. But Lot hesitates. There is a lot at stake here. Should he really leave all his belongings behind and take a leap of faith into the unknown with God? But God doesn’t hesitate. The angel grasped his hand and the hands of Lot’s loved ones and led them safely out of the city.

Our cry of anguish is also heard by God: ‘All my longings lie open before you, O Lord; my sighing is not hidden from you’ (Psalm 38:9). ‘The Lord heals the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds’ (Psalm 147:3). The helping hand of God is there in your life too. Can you see it? Who are the angels God has placed around you to sustain you in your time of need? Some may be visible, and others are invisible. God is here to pull you up with his love, grace and forgiveness, even if you can’t even muster the strength to lift your own arm up and meet his helping hand halfway. God goes all the way for you.

What does a helping hand look like for you?

**Almighty God, you are the helping hand that is always there to pull me up when I am drowning in the storms of life. Thank you for sending angels who bear me up on their hands, even when I don’t notice. Your provision and care are unfathomable, and I am so thankful. Use me with all my imperfections and limitations to be your helping hand to someone else this week. In Jesus’ name. Amen.**

Tuesday 23 November 2021

# A contradiction?

by Maria Rudolph

**[God] will give to each person according to what they have done (Romans 2:6).**

Read Romans 2:1–16

How many times have you heard a Bible verse quoted out of its context? Can you think of any situation at all where a Scripture passage is used to argue a certain point, yet it doesn’t sit right, and at closer inspection doesn’t actually fit with the supposed interpretation? It might only seem like a little thing, but the consequences can be very damaging, such as when a passage of Scripture is used to become legalistic about who can participate in Christian ministry. There is a verse in the Romans passage today, which, if read on its own, can lead to a completely wrong understanding of God and rob us of the comfort of knowing our redemption in Jesus. ‘God will give to each person according to what they have done’ (Romans 2:6). In another place (Psalm 62:12 and Proverbs 24:12), the same phrase is posed as a question: ‘Will he not repay each person according to what he has done?’ Well, the answer is surely yes. But also surely not.

What we require to understand one verse of Scripture is the wider context of the gospel. In God’s eyes, ‘all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God’ (Romans 3:23). That means each and every person can never lead a life so upright as to escape God’s judgement for something, even if it is only in their secret thoughts. The harsh reality is that you, I and all people we know, Christian or not, have utterly missed the mark and would be punished most severely by God. But then Jesus stepped in. In his unfathomable grace, he took all the wrath and punishment of God upon himself and died on our behalf. Then Jesus handed us a whitewashed robe dripping with his blood and covered us with it. So, when God sees us, he sees the blood of Jesus upon us, and we are clean, forgiven, redeemed, accepted, adopted. Loved. Amazing. ‘All are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood’ (Romans 3:24,25).

Context matters. Reading any given Scripture passage in the wider context of the Bible is important. Picking a verse out of its context and using it to make a point when it does not fit with the broader story of the Bible is harmful. But when we read Scripture in its context of God’s love, grace and acceptance, it becomes life-giving for and through us.

For you, what is an important Scripture passage to be read in its proper context?

**Loving God, help us to seek the bigger picture in your Scriptures. May your Holy Spirit constantly lead and guide us as we read and hear your word. In Jesus’ name. Amen.**

Wednesday 24 November 2021

# Hope unseen

by Maria Rudolph

**We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal (2 Corinthians 4:18).**

Read 2 Corinthians 4:16–5:10

People sometimes cringe when they hear that I’m a Christian and say that ‘faith stuff’ seems a bit far-fetched. Do I put my trust in a construct that only exists in my head while being surrounded by a world of hard facts and solid proof? Is faith really a matter of blind trust versus actual reality?

Coming to think of it, every person actually walks through each day full of trust and hope in hundreds of things. When we get on a plane or ship, we trust that the engineering was done correctly to avoid crashing or sinking. We don’t check it ourselves. When we enter into a relationship with people going beyond surface-level friendship, we trust and hope that we will be treated well by them and that they conduct themselves as honourable and truthful. When we build a house, we trust and hope that it will be secure and that no earthquake, fire or flood will destroy it. If we waited for solid proof every time, we would never decide to do anything. Trust is required to navigate through life.

Is it, then, really such a big leap of faith to put our hope and trust in Jesus, only because he is unseen? Sure, the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives is, for the most part, visually unseen – yet it is noticed and felt all the same. Let’s take stock for a moment and count the blessings just of today, starting with a fridge full of food and a roof over our heads. But beyond God’s daily provision, there is God’s eternal provision.

Daily life as a follower of Jesus is not void of hardships and suffering, quite the opposite. Paul today talks about our groaning (2 Corinthians 5:2) as we long for the daily struggle to be over so we can just spend eternity with God. Groaning! That sounds like downright agony, but doesn’t that resonate with you? While there is a lot of joy in daily living, there is also plenty of pain. Yet surprisingly, it is not only us groaning. The Holy Spirit is also groaning in a way that words cannot express, similar to the deep groaning of labour pains (Romans 8:26) while interceding for us. You read that right! The Holy Spirit is actually interceding for you right now to stay in the will of God. God knows exactly what is going on in your life right at this moment, and the Holy Spirit is already at work interceding for you and working within you to keep your eyes fixed on what is unseen – on the hope you have in Jesus.

Are you currently groaning or rejoicing – or both?

**Come, Holy Spirit, and fill me anew today. Thank you for your persistent intercession for me. Help me to fix my eyes on the hope I have in Jesus Christ. I am clothed with Christ and long for the day I can be with you in eternal glory. With your loving hand, lead me through the obstacles and joys of today. In Jesus’ name. Amen.**

Thursday 25 November 2021

# It starts with love

by Maria Rudolph

**I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love (Revelation 2:4).**

Read Revelation 2:1–11

I once talked with a friend whose connection to the Christian faith was attending the Christmas Eve service every year with her grandmother. She told me that after a few years of listening to the pastor pointing out in her sermon that certain people only ever seem to come to church on Christmas Eve, she was fed up with being told off about coming to church and stopped going altogether. Isn’t that tragic? A great opportunity to share the love of God with his people had been missed. Instead, the seed of rejection had been planted in this person.

Can we sometimes do the same? Admittedly, sometimes it seems that God is rather harsh, like in today’s reading. The gospel writer John is stuck on the island of Patmos and has a vision, which he describes in the Book of Revelation. God gives messages to seven churches, and he takes them to task! What do you think a letter from God to your own church would point out? What about a letter from God to yourself? God tells the people in the church at Ephesus that they have forgotten their first love. They have neglected to put Jesus first before everything and anything else. It sounds like a harsh rebuke, but note that God’s rebuke comes in the context of love. The church at Ephesus has been nurtured with the good news about the cross, God’s grace, their redemption and forgiveness through Christ’s blood (Ephesians 2:8–10). God makes it clear elsewhere in Revelation (3:19,20) that:

those whom I love, I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.

You see, it starts with love and has the end goal of a fuller communion with God. God does not rebuke outside of a context of love. And so it shall be with us who follow in the footsteps of Jesus. We cannot use God’s word to rebuke and discipline others if we do not have a context of love, relationship and nurture with them. And you can also see it ends with communion between God and people. The only reason for rebuke and discipline from God and his word is to bring about this full communion as a loved, baptised, redeemed child of God. This is the be-all and end-all of all Christian ministry. Remember your first love: Jesus above all other things. If Jesus is number one, all other things will fall into place, and even rebuke and discipline are framed in the context of love.

How does the rebuke of God’s word affect you?

**Loving God, you search me and know me. You know my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Open my eyes to see where I go wrong and to repent. You are my first love, and I need the help of your Holy Spirit daily to put nothing and no-one else in top position. I commit myself into your loving hands, in Jesus’ name. Amen.**

Friday 26 November 2021

# Confusing concepts, child-like faith

by Maria Rudolph

**And anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:15).**

Read Revelation 20:11–21:1

Have you ever tried to explain the taste of unfamiliar food to loved ones? ‘This crocodile meat tastes a bit like chicken, but the texture is slightly different’ is something I have been told before. It is curious: We can only use the language we know to describe the unknown. The mind seeks comparisons with familiar things to capture the new and the unfamiliar.

The gospel writer John must have operated in this way when penning the Book of Revelation. God had shown him visions about the end of time. It was all too grand, too outlandish, to put into words that could capture what he actually saw. And here we are today, reading the words, which would have made sense to an audience 2000 years ago, with a mind of the 21st century. John sees books opened before the throne of God. Immediately, my modern mind imagines printed and bound books made from paper like we are used to and have plenty of ourselves. But there was no printing press and, in fact, no bookbinding as we know it in John’s day. The ‘books’ must have been scrolls of parchment.

I wonder now what other details in the description of his visions match up with my mind’s eye. And yet, despite that, John obviously describes events of monumental dimensions. The dead will be judged, some will be thrown into the fire, and then heaven, earth and the sea will not exist in the way they do now. It’s way too much to take in. But what we can take in is this: Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. That’s it. We are not required to understand mind-boggling concepts as we try and make sense of God, the past, present, future and the end times. We are simply required to have a child-like faith, put our trust in Jesus and let God do the rest. With that, the Ancient of Days seated on the throne at the end of time will welcome us into his eternal glory.

Whose salvation are you concerned about when you consider the end times? How could you reach out to them with Christ’s love today?

**Mighty God, seated on the throne and surrounded by the seraphim and cherubim, I adore you. I am so thankful that you are also the same God who has made me and knows me intimately. Guide me back again and again to have a simple, child-like faith in you. Whenever my mind gets convoluted with too many airy-fairy concepts of you, lead me back to the simplicity of fixing my eyes on you and trusting you in everything. In Jesus’ name. Amen.**

Saturday 27 November 2021

# Always God

by Maria Rudolph

**To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul; in you I trust, O my God (Psalm 25:1).**

Read Psalm 25:1–10

Sometimes, the world seems dark and shattered into a million pieces. It doesn’t matter about the beautiful day outside. It doesn’t matter about the smiling faces of my family and their kind acts. It doesn’t matter how blessed I am to live in a peaceful country and have everything I need. There is this great heaviness upon me, and every next step seems like a ginormous effort. I just lie on the ground, unable to move. Unable to do anything at all.

It is in these moments that I am grateful that God is always there. I don’t even have to do anything. God is already there. He sits right beside me on the floor. He holds me in the palm of his loving hand. God is there. And in these moments, when nothing seems okay, and everything apparently falls apart, I just fall into God. And I am held. Securely. And that is all we ever need.

Take heart today in your own struggle and weariness. Lift your soul to the Lord; put all your trust in him. It’s all you will ever need. It won’t make your troubles disappear or change the circumstances around you. But God is taking your burdens upon himself and moves with you through it all. ‘Remember, O Lord, your great mercy and love’ (Psalm 25:6). Of course, God remembers. And as we focus on God through our trouble, our perspective changes to God’s perspective. ‘All the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful for those who keep the demands of his covenant’ (Psalm 25:10).

When in your life were you unable to do anything except cling to God?

**Loving God, I lift my soul to you and put all my trust in you. You are my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear? You are the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid? I completely place myself into your loving hands, knowing I am safe there. Grant me your peace that transcends all human understanding. In Jesus’ name. Amen.**

Sunday 28 November 2021

# To the moon and back!

by Darren Pope

**There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars … When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near (Luke 21:25a,28).**

Read Luke 21:25–36

Dappled silhouettes sway as lush leaves dance in the summer breeze. As they transition gently, the tarnished gnarled remnants flutter silently downward, weaving a mat of biomass. Wintery westerlies sing a restful lullaby, and dormancy prevails. Stillness. Rest. Recharge. The majestic magnolia tree framed by my window actively heralds new seasons. Patiently, we wait as across the night sky, celestial stars twinkle as moon phases wax and wane. The ordained passage of time ticks by.

Change is coming. Change is exponential by nature and our constant companion as we do life together. Driving past my magnolia, casual observers gain a momentary glimpse, a selective snapshot of ‘now’. They may only see full bloom or perhaps mere skeletal sticks. Change is incremental, too, honouring a journey of small daily growth.

Recharged, the tiny shoots become tightly twirled buds, bursting energetically into the light. Generous beauty is unveiled and shared. New life, hope and growth rise up. Advent pokes us in our slumber and stirs our anticipation of what is to come. In the tomb below Golgotha, dormant and still, Christ rested. Our loving Lord burst energetically into the light, and generous beauty was also unveiled and shared. Advent encourages us to lift our eyes in hope. A new season is coming. New life. Hope. God’s work changes everything.

His love is a timeless treasure. He loves you always.

He loves you to the moon and back!

**Lord of love, thank you for the gift of your grace each day. Thank you for loving me, no matter what. Thank you for being with me today. You and me, Lord. Amen. Let’s go!**